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PLAIN SEAMS and SEAM FINISHES

A.W. Koester

A seam is the line of stitching, usually done by machine, that holds two fabric edges together. Plain seams are the most basic construction stitching. When finished, the right side of a plain seam should look smooth without puckers or ripples, and should look as flat and inconspicuous as possible. Imprints or ridges from the seam allowance should not be visible from the right side. The wrong side of a plain seam also should look smooth without puckers. The seam allowance should be appropriate in width, either wide enough to lay flat or narrow enough not to roll. Weight-bearing seams and silhouette seams such as shoulder seams and side seams, usually are wider than enclosed seams, which should be trimmed to remove excess bulk.

Plain seams can be double-stitched in various ways for strength or neatness. Also, they can be made decorative with added topstitching, or cording or piping inserted between the two fabric edges. The way seams are made, pressed, and finished depends on the design and purpose of a garment and on the fabric.

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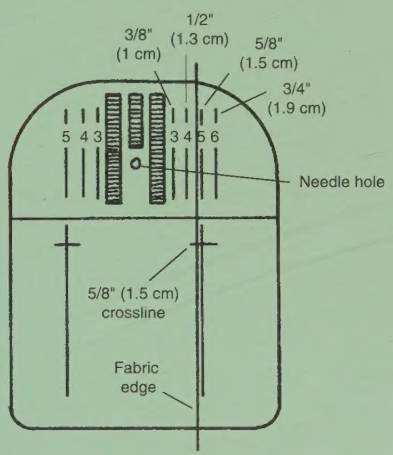
Seam allowances and guidelines

The seam allowance is the fabric between the stitched seamline and the cut edge. After a seam is stitched, the seam allowances are on the wrong side of a garment. The standard seam allowance in patterns in the United States is ⅝ inch (1.5 cm), sometimes trimmed after stitching to a narrower width. Lingerie patterns, and some patterns for knits, may have a narrower seam allowance. The allowance is always clearly marked on the pattern or indicated in the instructions. European patterns may have no seam allowance. You need to add them before you cut out the garment.

To maintain the size and lines of a garment, it is essential to keep the seam allowances even and at the given width as they are stitched. It is helpful to have the guideline for the fabric edge parallel to the presser foot. There are several kinds of seam guidelines.

Some machines have guidelines etched on the throat plate. The marks may be in inches or centimeters.



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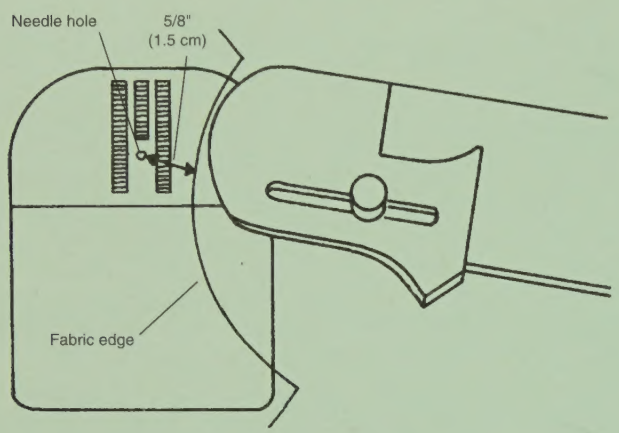
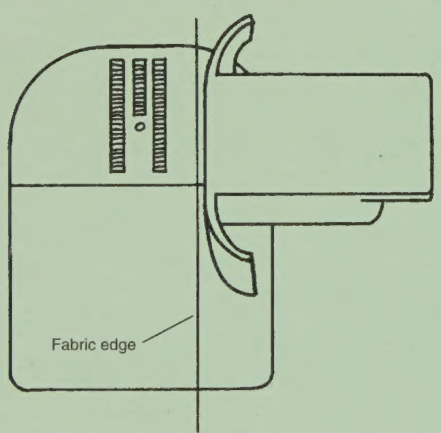
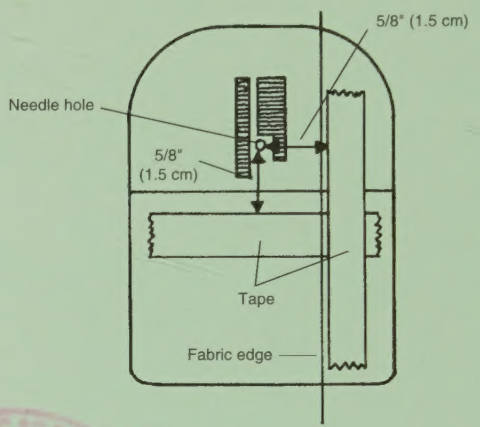
You can buy seam guide attachments of different kinds. One that is easy to use consists of a magnetized guard set on the throat plate at the desired distance from the needle—either to the right or left of it.

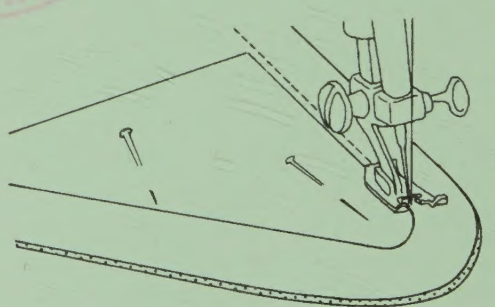




You also can make your own guideline from a 3-inch (7.5 cm) strip of frosted tape, with the markings you need. For turning corners, measure and mark a line (or lines) across the width of the tape, the same distance from the needle as the seam allowance. This guide can be placed either at the right or left of the needle.



In places where two identical finished edges face each other and must match perfectly (lapels, the two ends of a collar, etc.), you may need a special seam guide. This is particularly true with curves. In such cases, you can follow the marked seamline, but the easiest procedure is to draw the outline you want on plain paper, cut it out, pin it even with the desired seam line, and stitch along it.



By using the same guide for both edges, you are assured of a perfect match.

Stitch length

The stitch length for a seam will depend on the weight, texture, and structure of the fabric; the type of garment; location of the seam; and permanence of the stitching. Generally, heavier fabrics require longer stitches; lighter-weight fabrics require shorter stitches. Stretchy fabrics like knits and crepes and bias seam lines need longer stitches in order to allow for more elasticity of the seam. Fabrics with close yarns and compact structures need longer stitches in order to prevent a puckered look. Leather and vinyl-coated fabrics need relatively long stitches to prevent weakening the fabric.

Sewing the plain seam

The plain seam is the basic seam used most frequently; many other seams also begin with this seam.

Place the two garment pieces right sides together, edges even, notches or other construction marks matched. The edges to be stitched may be pinned or basted as necessary. Place pins perpendicular to the cut edge so they may be easily removed. Remove each pin just before the pressure foot reaches it. Stitching over pins can cause machine needles to break or bend. This can be expensive as well as dangerous.

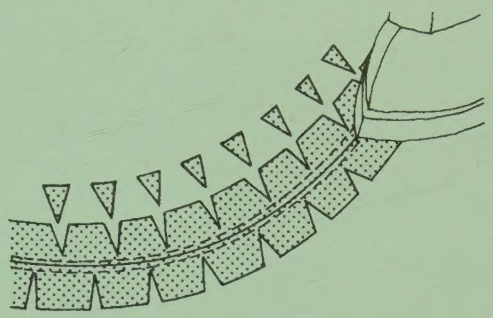
Stitch on the seam line. Either set the machine for a straight stitch or for the narrowest zigzag if you are working on a stretchy knit; the zigzag will give elasticity to a seam by adding more thread. If your machine has a special stretch stitch, you may want to use it for extra strength on a stretchy knit.

Press in three steps. Press the line of stitching as it was stitched, without opening the seam; then open the seam with the point of the iron, applying light pressure to fold open the seam allowances; then lightly press the open seam flat. Even if the seam allowances are finally to be pressed to one side, as in a facing, press them open first—you will have a much smoother seamline.

Plain seams often are made with two quite different edges:

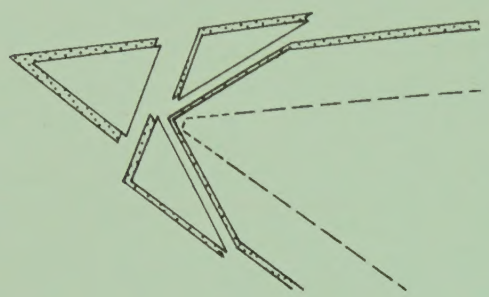
- When making a seam with a curved or bias edge and a straight edge, stitch with the straight edge on top.
- When making a seam with an eased edge and a plain edge, stitch with the eased edge down so the machine feed dogs work in the easing.
- When making a seam with a gathered or pleated edge and a plain edge, stitch with the fullness on top so you can control it.

Joining inward curve to outward curve. This curved seam takes special handling. Staystitch both edges ⅛ inch (3 mm) from the seamline. Clip the inward curve to the staystitching, making the clips as close as needed to allow the seamlines to meet. Then stitch the two pieces together on the seamline—you probably would do well to baste first. Notch the outward curve only enough to let the seam lie flat when open. If clips and notches are not directly across from each other, a smoother seam will result. Press the seam open.

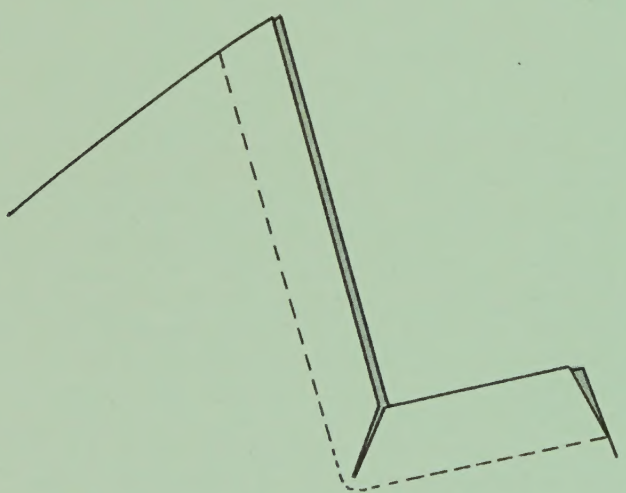


Corners in a seam. Before you come to an outward corner in a stitching line, shorten the length of the stitches for about ½ inch or 1.3 cm before and after the corner. How you handle the corner is determined by the sharpness of the angle at the corner. If the corner is a square right angle or wider angle, stop with the needle in the fabric, exactly at the corner—raise the presser foot, shift the fabric around the needle, and lower the presser foot so stitching can proceed in the next direction. If the corner is sharper or less than a square right angle, make one or two stitches across the corner in order to be able to turn the trimmed seam. Return the length of the stitches to normal after completing the corner.

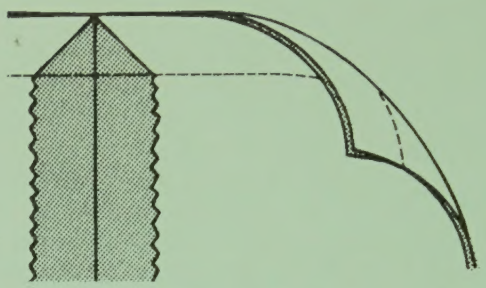
Trim the corners close to the stitching. If it is a sharply pointed corner, several snips may be necessary.



If the corner is inward, also shorten the length of the stitches for about ½ inch (1.3 cm) before and after the corner. Clip into the corner, taking care not to cut the stitching.



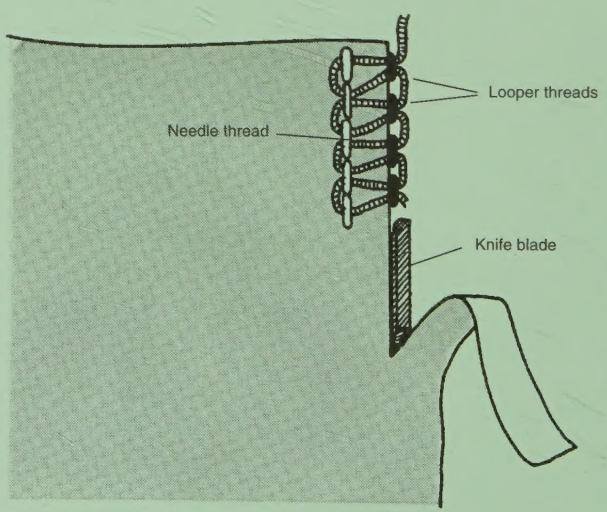
Crossing a seam. This means stitching over a seam with another seam. Never neglect pressing nor, if possible, finishing a seam before crossing it. When two seam ends come together to be crossed, carefully match the seamlines with a pin as you place right sides together. Put pins through the seam allowances to keep those on the underside from folding under as the crossed seam is stitched. After stitching, trim the seam allowance ends to reduce bulk.



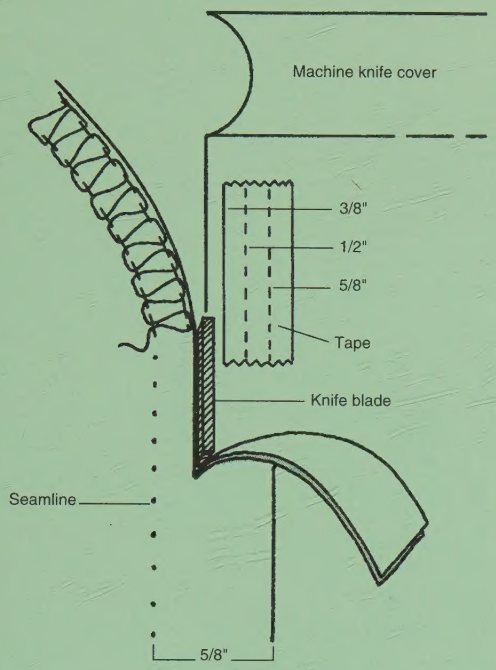
Serged seams. A serged seam is trimmed, stitched, and finished at the same time. Serging is appropriate for some seams and not for others. Uses of serged seams include:

- most knit garments, especially stretchy knits
- loose fitting garments when the seams do not need to lie flat
- where seam allowances don't need to be pressed open
- in fabrics that pucker easily
- when you are sure of the garment's fit and will not need to alter seams
- in non-bulky fabrics
- for straight or curved seams, but not corners (serged seams do not work for outside corners)

Before sewing a serged seam, sew a test seam. Mark the seamline, then determine where to position the fabric edge so the seam is sewn at the correct place.

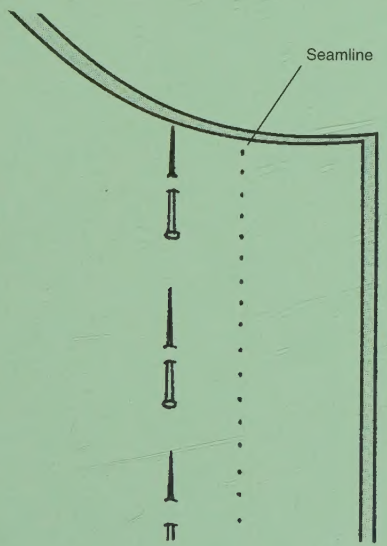


Completed serged seams vary from ¼ inch to ⅜ inch (6 mm-1 cm) wide. Some sergers have guide markings, or you may want to mark your serger with tape.

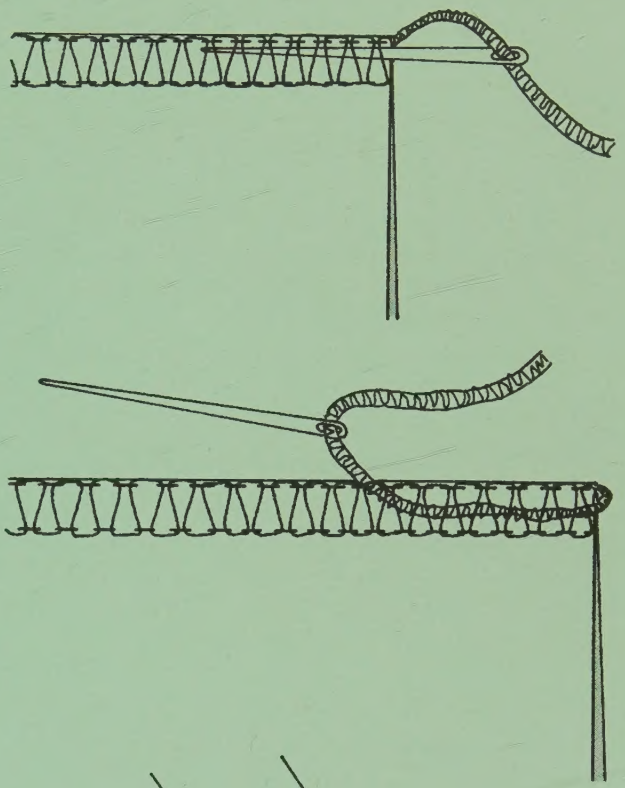


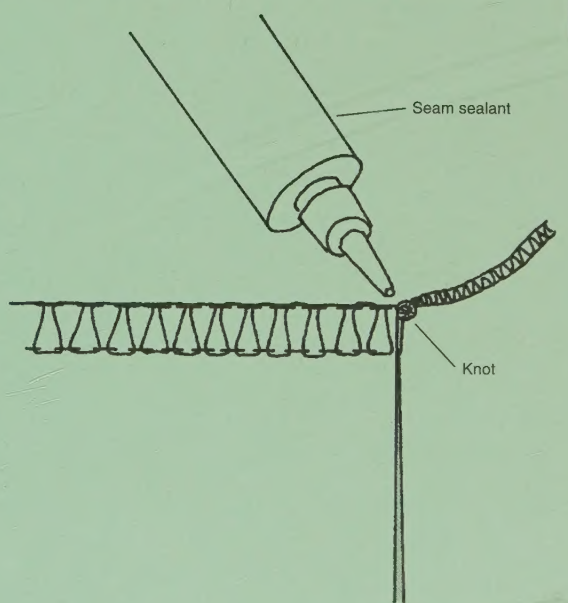
Check the stitch length and width for your fabric and the tension balance.

If you need to use pins, place them about 1 inch inside the cut edge, the same direction as the seam. They would damage the cutter blades if they crossed the seam and were not removed first.



Learn techniques for beginning and ending seams. To begin, fold the chain tail forward to be caught in the stitching. Seams can be ended in several ways. Stitch at the end to leave a chain, then tuck the chain into the seam with a large needle. Applying a drop of seam sealant to the end of the seam, allowing it to dry, then cutting off the chain is an easy finish.



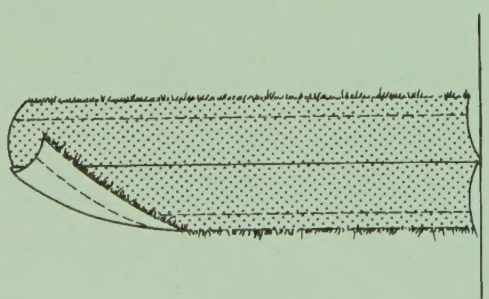


Seam finishes

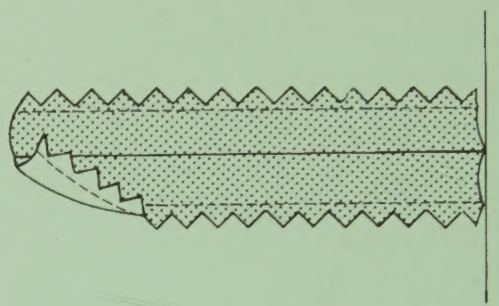
With knit fabrics and firmly woven fabrics, the edges of plain seams may be left as is. Otherwise the seam allowances must be finished to prevent raveling and for neatness, unless a garment is lined. Seam finishes are not essential to complete a garment, but they can add to the wear life. A seam finish should not add bulk or show through the right side of the garment. It is wise to try several seam finishes before deciding which one to use. Different fabrics call for different finishes. To decide which seam finish to use, consider:

- the fabric type and weight, whether it is woven or knit, its tendency to ravel or run, or the tendency of the seam edges to roll;
- the wear and care the garment will receive—garments that are worn and washed frequently will need more durable finishes than infrequently worn or trendy garments; and
- whether the seams will be seen—an unlined jacket requires attractive seam finishes, while a lined garment may need no seam finish or only one that will prevent raveling.

Machine stitched. Use a line of short machine stitches ¼ inch (6 mm) from the edge of the seam allowance. Allow the edge to fray and soften for fabrics with coarse yarns to prevent the edge from forming a ridge that may be visible on the right side.

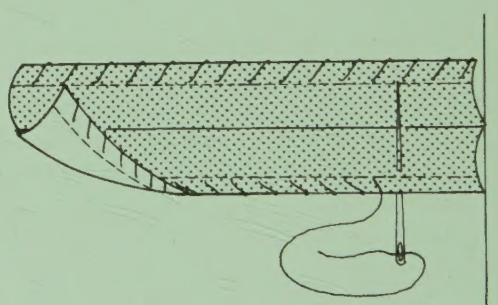


Stitched and pinked. Use a line of short stitches ¼ inch (6 mm) from the edge of the seam allowance. Then cut the edge of the seam allowance with pinking shears. This finish allows for the softening of the edge by pinking and minimizes raveling.

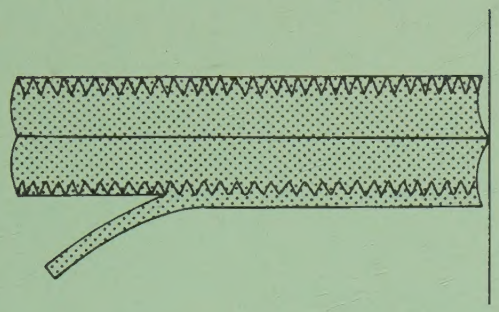


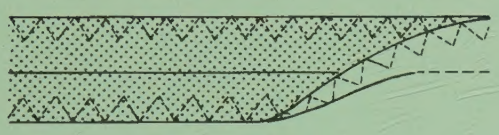
Hand-overcast. Make overcast stitches or blanket stitches by hand with a single thread. Space stitches about ¼ inch (6 mm) apart and ⅛ inch (3 mm) to ¼ inch (6 mm) deep.

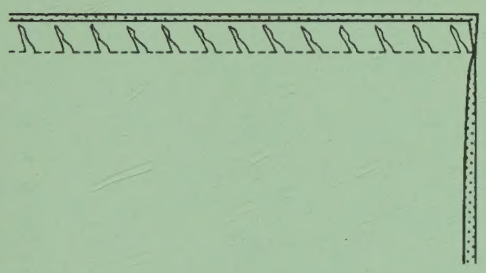
Overcasting may be preceded and guided by a line of straight stitching ¼ inch (6 mm) from the edge. Do not pull stitches too tight. This method is used on delicate, ravely fabrics such as silks, or when a machine zigzag stitch is impractical.



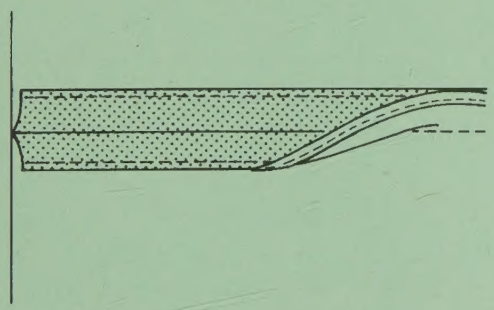
Zigzag. Test a sample of your fabric using a medium stitch length and medium stitch width. Stitch near but not on the edge of the seam allowance of soft fabrics; stitch over the edge of firm fabrics. Adjust stitch width and length so that the seam allowance lies flat without stretching or compressing. You also may use multi-stitch zigzag, machine overedge, or blind stitch. Check that the seam finish remains flat, not causing a ridge or imprint when pressed and not stretching or rippling. Readjust stitch length, width, and location on the seam allowance if needed. Trim the edge of the seam allowance to the stitching if needed. This is an effective finish to prevent raveling.



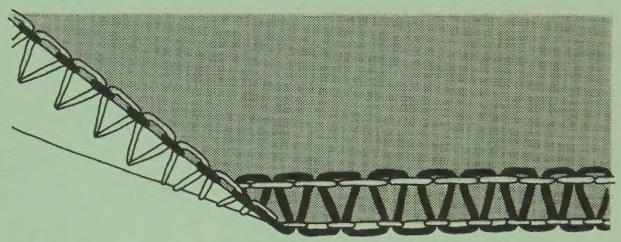


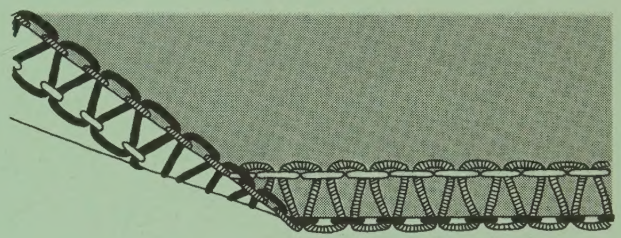


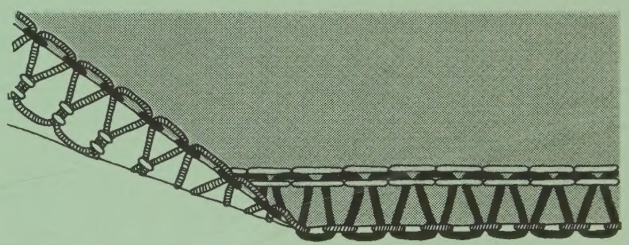
Turned and stitched. Turn under the edge of the seam allowance ⅛ inch (3 mm) and stitch along the folded edge. This finish may be used for light- to medium-weight fabrics. It is suitable for unlined jackets.



Serged finishes of conventionally sewn seams. Serge the edge of each seam allowance with a 2-, 3-, or 4-thread stitch. The 2-thread stitch is not secure, but it may be used where minimal bulk is desired. The 3-thread stitch is most used because it allows for stretching and is secure. The 4-thread stitch is secure and is used to prevent stretch. Place the edge of the seam allowance next to the cutting blade so that only the excess raveled threads are cut away.







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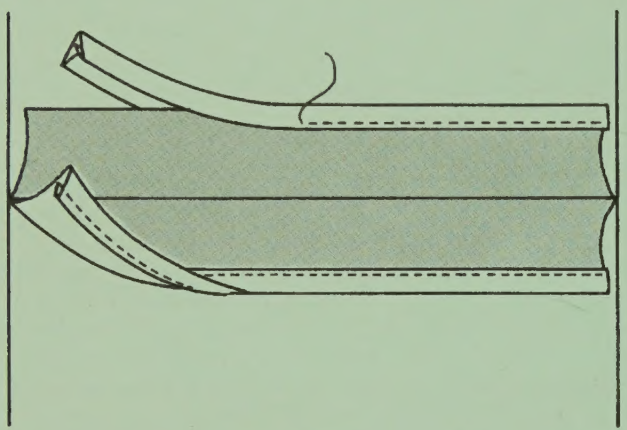
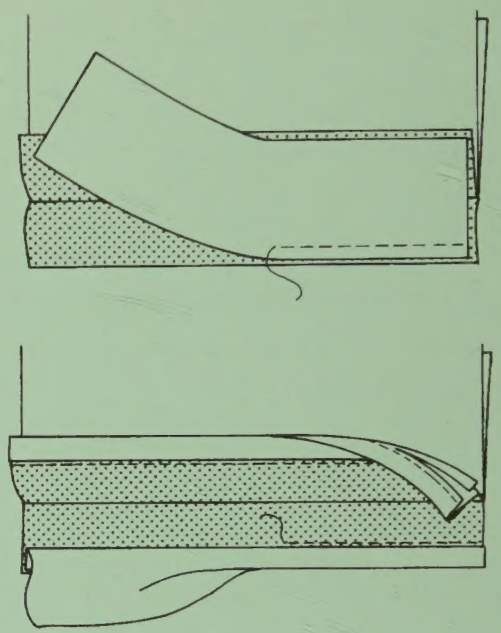
Bias bound edges. You may use strips of bias lining or underlining, double-fold bias tape, or fold-over lace to enclose seam edges. Wrap the folded edges of the bias around the seam allowance with the wider side of the bias on the underside. Stitch close to the edge of the top fold catching the underneath fold. Bias bound edges may be used on light- to medium-weight unlined jackets or coats.



Hong Kong. Cut 1½ inch (4 cm) wide bias strips of light-weight material. With the right sides together, stitch the bias strip to the seam allowance ⅛ inch (3 mm) from edge. Turn the bias over the edge to the underside and press. From the right side, stitch in the crevice of the fabric fold from the first stitching, catching the unfinished edge. Trim the unfinished edge of the bias close to the stitching. This finish is used for heavy-weight, unlined jackets and coats. It is an attractive finish that has decorative uses.



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